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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BAKU 001067

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [KCOR](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI ISLAMIC STRUCTURE'S
LAGGING LGITIMACY
POSES RISKS

REF: A. BAKU 00096
[1](#)B. BAKU 00581
[1](#)C. BAKU 00748

Classified By: Ambassador Anne Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) -- the official GOAJ establishment for administering Islam -- is a legacy from the Czarist and Soviet approach to religion, and is responsible for the education and placement of imams throughout Azerbaijan. The CMB -- and its leader, Sheikh Allahshukur Pashazade -- appear to enjoy little support from religious Azerbaijanis, who view the Sheikh and his fellow CMB imams as corrupt and poorly educated. While Sheikh Pashazade cultivates an image as protector of Azerbaijan's tradition of religious tolerance and works effectively with his counterparts from the Christian and Jewish communities, his rent-seeking activities, such as skimming money from donations at pilgrimage sites, the hajj, and clerical appointments are quickly reducing his credibility with religiously observant Muslims. The CMB's lagging legitimacy is opening up a religious vacuum for alternative sources of religious authority, which could create problems for the GOAJ over the next decade, if radical, external actors fill the void. End Summary.

Caucasus Muslim Board: Historical Inheritance

[1](#)2. (C) The Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) is a legacy from the Russian Czarist and Soviet approach to Islamic practice in Azerbaijan. Both political systems created religious departments within their respective governments as tools to control Islam. These institutions served as gatekeepers for appointing official clerics, regulating Islamic education, and shaping the overall character of Islamic practice to ensure it supported Moscow. The GOAJ has almost entirely retained this structural approach toward Islam.

[1](#)3. (C) The structure represented by the CMB increasingly appears outmoded against the slow but steady resurgence of Islamic practice in Azerbaijan. While most Azerbaijanis still have a limited understanding of Islamic theology, a gradual change is occurring, particularly among Azerbaijanis under the age of thirty-five. Azerbaijanis' gradually rising interest in learning more about Islamic theology and practice is a key dynamic that is unraveling the GOAJ's anachronistic approach toward Islam as represented by the CMB.

¶4. (C) The Baku-based CMB administrative headquarters are located next to the Blue Mosque, although the CMB hopes to move to the grounds of the Teze Pir (New Holy Place) Mosque. (NOTE: The two mosques are the largest Shia mosques in Baku. The Teze Pir takes up an entire block in one of Baku's oldest neighborhoods.) We estimate the CMB has several dozen employees. During a recent visit, clearly armed thuggish-looking young men were congregating in an office near the Sheikh's. While they were likely bodyguards, the open display of weapons detracts from the sense of religiosity of the area. All mosques must receive CMB approval before they can be officially registered with the State Committee on Work with Religious Affairs (SCWRA). (NOTE: The SCWRA was established in 2001. Rafiq Aliyev, the first chairman of the SCWRA, had acrimonious relations with the Sheikh and the CMB. Since the July 2006 appointment of new SCWRA leader Hidayat Orjuvov, however, relations between the two bodies have warmed considerably. Local contacts report the Sheikh and Orujov have reached a modus vivendi on the respective responsibilities for the two institutions, with the Sheikh taking the lead on Islamic issues. Per ref A, Orujov publicly deferred to the Sheikh during a December 2006 lunch hosted by the Ambassador.) The CMB also organizes Azerbaijanis, participation in the hajj and other religious pilgrimages.

¶5. (C) The CMB is the gatekeeper for controlling official clerics and official mosques. The CMB oversees the education and placement of all state-appointed imams (known locally as akhunds) and other Islamic teachers to mosques and madrassas. The CMB administers the Baku Islamic University and its extension branches, which are the official pathway for